Jerry Williams Comments at National interagency Fuels Workshop
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Wildland fire management today has some very high stakes. The fires of last Novemeber in southern California caused numerous fatalities, injuries, huge property losses and tremendous personal impacts to a large portion of the public.

There are two schools of thought regarding why fires are becoming such a problems.

- One school contends that the fires caused so much damage because there were flawed fire suppression strategies and lack of coordination of suppression forces.

- Another school of thought (which I believe) is that the condition of the fuels predisposes many areas in this country to large damaging wildland fires.

The fires of last November did not happen in Wisconsin…they happened in the area served by the biggest fire department in the world. Between US Forest Service, Interior Bureaus, CDF, and local agencies over 3.5 billion dollars are being spent annually to staff and manage fire protection in southern California. Despite these large, sophisticated, well-managed suppression agencies wildland fires burning under *moderate* Santa Ana wind conditions burned more acres and caused more damage than ever seen in southern California.

It seems clear that increasing protection funding is not the solution. We need to improve the condition of fuels across landscapes and harden structures to allow fire to pass without damage.

In the Forest Service, "Stewardship for the Land" is one of our core values (along with Safety, Integrity, and Mutual Respect).

It is perhaps a coincidence that we meet here in Albuquerque, where 80 years ago a man named Leopold began shaping a powerful new concept, the "Land Ethic".

In 1927, writing in a range journal, Leopold observed changes in the forests due to overgrazing and fire exclusion. These observations were in the ponderosa pine type…our Fire Regime 1. Those same observation were later made again in other long-needle pine ecosystems. Weaver, in Oregon in the 1940s, Biswell in California in the 1940s and 50s, Stoddard in the south.

We're here now as stewards of the land to move aggressively in response to these observations.

We work in a difficult environment with volatile fuel condition on more than 70 million acres across the U.S. Social expectation for protection is high, but so are their concerns

for how the forests look and what they produce. It goes without saying that political tolerance for "mistakes" is low, regardless of risk. I want to emphasize that this is a good time to clarify our objectives and embrace a set of practices and principles…and anchor hard against them. I think you understand why.

Our objective: Restore and maintain resilient, diverse, and functioning fire-adapted ecosystems. This is our "end". We will be prescribe burning, precommercial thinning, and commercial thinning as the "means" to achieve the "ends".

But we must not confuse means with ends when we burn or thin or harvest. As a principle, we don't undertake these activities because we need "black acres" or because we need to meet the forest thinning target, or because there's valuable timber to utilize. We undertake these activities *first* to positively change the condition of the forest. We do these things *first* to restore and maintain resilient, diverse, and functioning fire-adapted forests.

Stay anchored to this objective!

We are moving toward treating 4 million acres per year between USFS and DOI. That's a big jump and it should prompt us to revisit the way we do business and ask ourselves if we shouldn't improve the way we do business.

Let me urge you to adopt a set of principles:

1. **Establish and *use* fire danger and stand condition risk thresholds** to govern the use of fire. We are a "con-do" outfit, but we can't push bad positions. In many places we need to mechanically treat before we burn. But it costs more money. Don't let pressures to reduce treatment costs put you on a path to disaster. Establish limits of prescribed fire risk and stick to them!

2. **Adopt a support system nationally that mobilizes for prescribed fire or fire use opportunities** like we mobilize for wildfire threats. This is a big job…burning windows open and close and opportunities at local levels become limited. If we internalize it to our unit or even Geographic Area we will likely fall short.

3. **Plan for contingencies.** If one part of the country can't burn, but another can we need to have systems in place and acceptance to rapidly move targets and dollars. At these treatment scales and with narrow burning windows of opportunity we need to be quick on our feet.

4. **Don't let more trouble pile on.** Much of the condition class 3 land we protect is land we manage in and for that condition. Look at opportunities to amend land and resource management plans (especially in dry forest types) where the risk of losing the resource objective exceeds the probability of sustaining it. For example spotted owl habitat that developed due to fire exclusion.

5. **Put treatment priorities where we have willing partners and wanting publics.** We need to avoid the high costs that come with "going it alone".

You've worked hard. We've come a long way.

- The work ahead has been acknowledged by a five-fold increase in funding over the past four years.

- The work ahead has been made easier with passage of the Healthy Forest Restoration Act.

- The work ahead has more and more organizational support.

At a Forest Service meeting in Nebraska last week 120 Forest Supervisors spontaneously expressed their commitment by signing a pledge to the Chief to do all possible to help reduce the fire problem.

We've got a ways to go. There's not always enough money. Sometimes regulatory controls will confound us. But, despite the problems ahead, we need to "gut up" and deliver!

Make no mistake.

This is a critical year.

- The Departments support this.

- The Congress supports this.

- The President supports this.

Let's get it done!